

History of Roanoke County, Virginia

In the 1740s, the first Scotch-Irish and German settlers reached the upper Roanoke Valley by traveling from Pennsylvania through the Shenandoah Valley. They were joined by Tidewater Virginians of English ancestry who journeyed up the valleys of the James and Roanoke Rivers.

Roanoke County, named after the Roanoke River, was formed in 1838 from a portion of Botetourt County and in 1849 a portion of Montgomery County was added. Roanoke County's name comes from the Indian word "Rawrenock", which means wampum. Wampum were white shell beads worn by Native Americans. This explanation comes from Captain John Smith, who wrote about the origins of Roanoke Island in North Carolina's Albermarle Sound.

Most of Roanoke County was rural in nature and farming was predominant throughout the area. By the latter half of the 20th century, Roanoke County, (the "County"), was in transition from farm to factory, but the County's rural population was still relatively large in 1920.

The County today has a population of approximately 88,200 and is a mostly suburban area that surrounds the City of Roanoke. Its 251 square miles include the Town of Vinton; Hollins, home of the prestigious Hollins University for women; and historic Bonsack. A diversified economic base provides security from market fluctuations related to particular products.

The County is governed by a charter approved by the 1986 session of the Virginia General Assembly which grants additional authority to the County Administrator. The Board of Supervisors is the governing body of the County. Members of the Board, one from each of five magisterial districts, are elected to four-year terms. Board members annually select a Chairman and Vice-Chairman to each serve a one-year term.

The Board appoints a County Administrator to act as administrative head of the County. The County Administrator serves at the pleasure of the Board, carries out its policies and directs business procedures. All department heads report to the County Administrator except for the School Board, Welfare Board, Library Board, Health Department and the County Attorney who report directly to the Board. Five constitutional officers (Commissioner of the Revenue, Commonwealth's Attorney, Clerk of the Circuit Court, Sheriff, and Treasurer) are elected by the voters of the County and are not accountable to the Board, but work closely with the Board and the County Administrator.

On July 1, 1980, the Roanoke County Public Service Authority (therein called the "Authority") was dissolved and the sewer utility operation became a part of the utility department within the County government. The water utility operation had been transferred to the County effective July 1, 1976. Effective July 1, 2004 these utility operations were transferred to the newly formed Western Virginia Water Authority.

Roanoke County's pioneering spirit extends to modern times. In 1989, Roanoke County was named an All-American City. Regional cooperation, public-private partnerships, citizen involvement, innovation, and quality services provide the foundation for Roanoke County's strength. The County was the first in the state to have curbside recycling, and in 1996, the library system began offering free public access to the Internet.

The Department of Engineering and Inspections acquired a 50/50 grant from the U.S. Corps of Engineers to develop a GIS mapping system providing digital orthophotos, topographic and planimetric features. Integration with the County's E-911 dispatch system, school bus and solid waste vehicle routing is planned.

The County participates in the Roanoke Regional Airport Commission, formed in 1987. Mutual concern for valley air service and growth resulted in a two million-dollar contribution from the County over a ten-year period. This is representative of a new cooperative, promotional spirit that is emerging in the Roanoke Valley between local governments. In addition, the County has been nationally recognized for governmental cooperation with Botetourt County. Past cooperative efforts between the two counties include the building of a joint industrial park and a library.

In November 1992, the Roanoke County Police Department became the first nationally accredited department in Southwest Virginia. Existing departmental programs, including criminal investigations, traffic enforcement, domestic violence, crime prevention, criminal apprehension, and community-involved policing, were enhanced through the accreditation process.

The Roanoke Valley Resource Authority, (the "RVRA"), was established on October 23, 1991 under a user agreement between the County of Roanoke, the City of Roanoke and the Town of Vinton to develop a regional solid waste disposal facility. A seven-member board appointed by the governing bodies of the Charter Members presently governs the RVRA. The County has control over the budget and financing of the Authority only to the extent of representation by board members appointed. The old regional sanitary landfill operated by the Roanoke Valley Regional Solid Waste Management Board was closed on September 30, 1993.

From its beginning, Roanoke County has served as a catalyst for growth and unity in the Roanoke Valley. In fact, most of the present day neighborhoods in the Valley started life within Roanoke County. The County continues to support this cooperative spirit with its citizens, private commercial and industrial interests, and area localities.